

Jury finds 6 guilty of drug dealing

by Jim Smith

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A federal court jury in Philadelphia yesterday convicted a reputed Colombian drug cartel "cell leader" of peddling hundreds of pounds of cocaine to a local cocaine trafficker.

The defendant, Jose Gonzalez-Rivera, 47, of the Bronx, N.Y., whom one witness said owns a \$5 million ranch in Medellin, Colombia, faces 20 years to life in prison, said Assistant U.S. Attorneys Carlos A. Martir Jr. and Tom Suddath.

Rivera's common-law wife and nephew were among five codefendants also convicted of drug trafficking charges following a trial that lasted nearly six weeks.

The verdict is the result of an elaborate undercover sting operation by FBI agents and New Jersey State Police, the prosecutors said.

The undercover agents and troopers leased space in 1990 in a Pennsauken, N.J., industrial park,

Cuban's testimony convicts suppliers

and opened an equipment rental business called MRK Services Inc. to lure in drug dealers.

They offered to rent or sell cars and vans with secret smuggling compartments that could hold between 100 pounds and 1,000 pounds of cocaine, respectively, as well as beepers and cellular phones drug dealers use to communicate.

One of their best customers was Cristobal Paz, a Cuban refugee living in Philadelphia, not long out of prison for drug trafficking and eager to jump back in.

Paz was willing to pay \$500 a day for a Chevy Lumina with hidden spaces to stash his powdery product.

Paz didn't know it at the time but the cellular phone he'd rented at MRK was bugged.

And the Lumina he took on four trips contained tracking devices

that enabled agents to follow it up and down the East Coast.

Other undercover agents managed to buy cocaine from Paz, more than 15 pounds in all.

When confronted with video and audio taped evidence of his own drug dealing, Paz turned informant and agreed to testify against his suppliers.

Paz testified he was buying more than 100 pounds of cocaine a month from Rivera alone, paying about \$17,000 a kilogram and reselling it in Philadelphia and elsewhere for up to \$21,000 a kilogram, the prosecutors said.

"He [Paz] made over \$6 million. That's net," Martir said.

Paz, formerly of A Street near Potter, now hopes to get a reduced prison term.

Rivera testified he worked in a jewelry store. He denied involvement in drug trafficking, and insisted he was born and raised in Puerto Rico, not Colombia.

U.S. District Judge Robert S. Gawthrop III set sentencing for Jan. 11. ■

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